



Brecht Today: Interview with Alexander Kluge

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Alexander Kluge is one of the most important voices of the 20th century. A political philosopher associated with the writings of the Frankfurt School, a filmmaker and a novelist, Kluge is a figure that has challenged Orthodox Marxist philosophy and the conventions of cinematic and literary language. His films employ Marxist methodology and Brechtian formal strategies, but they do not force any certain response or conclusion. Marxism is used as a methodology and not as a dogma. Kluge brings Marxism back to its initial interest in questioning perceptions taken for granted and revealing that what passes for real and natural is socially constructed.

To achieve this effect, Kluge employs formal elements that challenge the dramaturgical conventions of dominant cinema. Voice-over narration, which is used extensively in his films, quotes the characters' actions and emotions and deprives the audience of any empathetic identification with them. At the same time, multiple intertitles interrupt the narratives and pose questions to the audience without offering any answers. One can certainly identify the Brechtian aspect of his formal experiments. Thus, his films eloquently show the shift from a Brechtian cinema intended to communicate a certain amount of knowledge, to a post-Brechtian one that challenges the politics of perception and offers the audience 'unfinished material'.

Co-writer of the Oberhausen Manifesto (1962), Kluge advocated a new cinematic language that opposed the clichés of the dominant cinema. In his first feature film, *Yesterday Girl* (*Abschied von Gestern*, 1966), he tells the story of Anita G, a young East German immigrant of Jewish origin, who struggles to integrate herself in West-German reality after the end of the war. Despite being structured as a character-based narrative, the film goes beyond goal-orientated dramaturgy and suggests that Germany has not overcome the historical traumas of the past. The fascism of every-day life preoccupies him also in one of his most popular films *Part-Time Work of a Domestic Slave* (*Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin*, 1973) which tells the story of Rosewitha

Bronski, a woman who works part-time as an illegal abortionist so as to supplement her family's income. Rosewitha gives up her job in fear of the police and becomes involved in trade unions and radical politics. Shot as a semi-documentary, the film brings to light the politics of every-day life and the fascistic aspects of late capitalism. Furthermore, the film's gender politics are not oversimplistic stories of female exploitation but form part of the larger socio-political reality of post-war Germany. In *Germany in Autumn*, (*Deutschland im Herbst*, 1978) Kluge, along with directors such as Edgar Reitz, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and many more, tries to offer a historical explanation for Germany's terrorist crisis during the Red Army Faction years. In all his films politics and history play an important role, but history is represented politically and not as a humanized narrative of victims and perpetrators. In this way, Kluge valorises the presentation of questions and contradictions over coherent dramatisation. As he explains: 'there can be no doubt that the narrative of an individual fate can convey historical material, only at the price of dramaturgical incest' (Kluge 1981, 206).

In his most recent film, *News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx, Eisenstein, The Capital* (*Nachrichten aus Der Ideologischen Antike - Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, 2008) Kluge explores Eisenstein's unrealised project of filming Marx's *Capital* and combines it with James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Kluge's stance is marked by wonder, questions and a certain amount of naiveté that intends to show how Marx's theory of commodity production is not outmoded. At one point, the image of a woman walking the street is scrutinised so as to discover the historical processes that form the identity of an individual. Action is interrupted and the voice-over informs us that her bag is manufactured in India, by underpaid Indian women, while her clothes are made of silk produced by similarly exploited workers in other parts of the world.

Kluge employs a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* so as to uncover the politics of every-day relationships. This practice characterises all of his films. Unlike Brecht's view of the author as the person in control of knowledge who can make the masses politically conscious Kluge employs dialectical contradictions that do not lead to a synthetic resolution. His films can be seen as part of the essay film genre which has largely been influenced by Theodor Adorno's view of essay-writing as an antisystematic form of writing that refutes the doubling of existing reality. Adorno sees the essay as an incomplete artefact structured upon self-reflection. He writes:

Even in its manner of delivery, the essay refuses to behave as though it had deduced its object and had exhausted the topic. Self-relativisation is immanent in its form; it must be constructed in such a way that it could always and at any point, break off. It thinks in fragments just as reality is

fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.¹

What Adorno sees as dialectical in the essay-writing is its emphasis on discontinuity that rejects any sense of absolute knowledge and totality. Essay writing is experimental and aims at viewing the object from various perspectives. Adorno's view of this as a form of experimentation aptly describes Kluge's cinema, which does not provide totalising claims to truth, but places emphasis on the process of assembling materials that eschew compositional precision. However, what remains important is that Kluge still affirms his belief in the 'ghosts of the past', such as Marx, Eisenstein and Brecht. Despite the fact that he does not share their ideological certainties, he constantly returns back to them and re-reads them so as to question the 'naturalisation of capitalism'. His aspiration is to see these figures of the past in a historical context and not as 'museum pieces'. In this interview, we discuss how Brecht, a theorist who has largely influenced film theory and practice, can be still used productively in cinema.

Interview²

Koutsourakis: I want to discuss some things about Brecht in relation to your own films and writings...

Kluge: Yes I have used Brecht in my films and my writings. In my latest feature film, *News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx, Eisenstein, The capital* (*Nachrichten aus Der Ideologischen Antike - Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, 2008) I mention Brecht's intention to write the Communist Manifesto in hexameter. It's like Homer's *The Iliad*. There is a discussion between the poet Durs Gruenbein and myself about this subject.

Koutsourakis: Let's start with Brecht and film then. As a film director you have consciously employed Brechtian strategies in your films. Do you think that Brecht's theory and practice can be still beneficial for film practice?

Kluge: Well there are several aspects that we have to consider. Brecht himself got involved in filmmaking and he wrote many essays on film. Brecht's film writings can still inspire us to make films in 2011 and with good results. The questions are different. So the films will be different from the films he got involved in. His theatre and political theory are also very important. Though, I think that his less-ideological pieces, like *Baal*, are more interesting as opposed to plays like *Die Maßnahme*.

¹ Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay As Form', trans. by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, in *New German Critique*, 32:2 (1984), pp.151-171, here p. 164.

² This is a telephone interview that took place on the 29th of March 2011.

Koutsourakis: Brecht introduced a representation that gives more important to the fragment, so as to encourage reflection on the part of the audience. There are moments that one senses that the combination of the fragments guide the audience to a certain response. Conversely, you pile up many fragments that deny hermeneutical orientation.

Kluge: It is respect for the audience. The ‘fiction’ has already been told by history or the reality. We are only giving you comments when we make a film or write a piece of literature. We do not guide you to a counter-reality. We only give you hints. We are like scouts. Take as an example my last film *News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx, Eisenstein, The Capital* (*Nachrichten aus Der Ideologischen Antike - Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, 2008). This is a new film and shows the ways I employ Brechtian practices in the present. The author does not take any decisions. The author analyses or counter-analyses, or repeats, or makes comments. The spectator is asked to make her/his own associations.

Koutsourakis: You write somewhere that film has to recover the degree of abstraction inherent in language. I was thinking of Brecht’s idea of ‘literarization’ of the medium.

Kluge: Film should include all capacities of language. But language and images should not strive for precision. They will be uncertain and open. I am anti-Wittgenstein. I do not believe in logic, I believe in the power of associations.

Koutsourakis: Is there a dialectical aspect in this?

Kluge: I am not sure if it is dialectical. It has to do with the medium itself. The medium already exists in people’s brains. You find film since the Stone Age, in the people’s mind. Then we have the technical invention, which is more than 100 years old. This film exists before in our brain and our emotions. The films in our brain are not logical. They are full of illusion, temperament and music. This world of associations has its own logic. Cinema should understand what it can do and not to suppress film by thought. I believe in thought and ideas, but the clear ideas have to respect what the camera does and what people can do.

Koutsourakis: I want to talk a bit about historical representation. You said once that one can represent history only at the expense of dramaturgical accuracy. In what ways can the medium deal with history?

Kluge: My book *Cinema Stories* clarifies these issues in detail. You can certainly represent history in film but in different manner than the ways history explains itself. So it is not a matter of reproduction.

Koutsourakis: One of the intertitles in the beginning of *Yesterday Girl* (*Abschied von Gestern*) says that ‘what separates us from yesterday is not a rift, but a change in position’. The film goes against the idea that the mistakes of the past have reformulated the present. Speaking about the historical present in what ways do you think that we repeat past mistakes?

Kluge: History and people repeat mistakes. But these mistakes are different. The complete evolution of life consists of mistakes, which form a new kind of life. We shall not be afraid of mistakes. People and societies are not capable of repeating everything in the same way. They constantly change without even knowing this. Below the conscious processes of history, there is an unconscious one. There is an element of progress but you cannot tell whether progress favours people. It may be progress for the people (more liberty) or progress that leads to Auschwitz. Society sometimes cannot perceive the route it follows.

Koutsourakis: In one of your essays, in English it is translated ‘The Political Intensity of Everyday Feelings’, you suggest that in order to politicise art one needs to reveal the political aspects of life that we do not perceive as political. Brecht suggested something similar, when he argued that emotions and feelings are not universal but political per se. With these comments in mind how can cinema politicise the depiction of feelings?

Kluge: Well in both ways. By touching form and politics it can be political and by touching an explicit political subject it might be private. Elements of organised policy are hidden in our personal lives. Then again, organised policy is only part of the society’s political life. I wrote a book this week. It is about three political stories of this year.

Koutsourakis: In one of your conversations with Adorno, you state that Adorno recommended you to ‘shoot blind’, that is to shoot without looking. Could you expand a bit on this?

Kluge: This is very essential. You have to be blind, that is, without intentions. You should respect the object or the subject of what you describe. You are the author, but you must not impose anything. Therefore, the object you describe, or the persons you film are the second author or the third

author. It is an anarchic idea. The author is as important as the object of representation and the object as important as the author. You see, there is a balance between the filmmaker and the product. The author in the classical sense does not exist at all. You might comment on something but you must not dominate by writing or making a film. Heiner Müller, my friend, advocated a blind argumentation and we should never forget that the ancient poet Homer was blind.

Koutsourakis: Speaking of Müller, in a very often cited quote he stated that 'to use Brecht without criticising him means to betray him'. In what ways can we use Brecht in film without betraying him?

Kluge: Yes because Brecht always agitated. Of course we have to criticise him, you have to criticise me too. This is the correct attitude that one has to criticise everybody, that's something that Brecht says too. But on the other hand it is too 'elegant' for me. In a world where Brecht is neglected, I do not think that we have to criticise him. I agree completely with Heiner Müller. However, at the moment I think that it is necessary to bring Brecht back to the society and place him into our contemporary reality. There is no necessity to criticise somebody relatively unknown and absent from the media and from television. You can criticise Berlusconi, but when it comes to Brecht, we have to disseminate his work first and then criticise him.

Alexander Kluge Filmography

Brutality in Stone (*Brutalität in Stein*, 1960) Co-directed with Peter Schamoni. & Peter Schamoni. Short.

Rennen, 1961 Co-directed with Paul Kruntorad. P. Rolf A. Klug, E. Bessi Lemmer. Short.

Teachers in (Transition) Lehrer im Wandel, 1963) Co-directed with Karen Kluge. Short.

Portrait of a Probation (*Porträt einer Bewährung*, 1964). Short.

Yesterday Girl (first feature film). (*Abschied von Gestern*, 1966).

Mrs Blackburn born 5 January 1872 is Filmed (*Frau Blackburn, geb. 5. Jan. 1872, wird gefilmt*, 1967). Short.

Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed (*Die Artisten in der Zirkuskuppel: Ratlos*, 1967).

Fire Fighter E. A. Winterstein (*Feuerlöscher E. A. Winterstein*, 1968). Short.

The Indomitable Leni Peickert (*Die unbezähmbare Leni Peickert*, 1970).

The Big Mess (*Der grosse Verhau*, 1971).

A Doctor from Halberstadt (*Ein Arzt aus Halberstadt*). Short.

We 3 x 27 Billion U.S. Dollars in an Attack Butcher Block (*Wir verbauen 3 x 27 Milliarden Dollar in einen Angriffsschlachter*, 1971). Short.

Willi Tobler and the Decline of the 6th Street (*Willi Tobler und der Untergang der 6. Flotte*, 1971).

Part-Time Work of a Domestic Slave (*Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin*, 1973).

In Danger and Deep Distress, the Middle Way Spells Certain Death (*In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod*, 1974). Co-directed with Edgar Reitz.

Strongman Ferdinand (*Der Starke Ferdinand* , 1976).

The people who are preparing for the Stauffer-year (*Die Menschen, die das Stauffer-Jahr vorbereiten*). Co-directed with Maxamiliane Mainka. S. Maximiliane Mainka. Short.

News from the Hohenstauffens (*Nachrichten von den Stauffern I und II* 1977). Co-directed with Maximiliane Mainka. S. Maximiliane Mainka, Alexander Kluge. Short.

Germany in Autumn (*Deutschland im Herbst*, 1978). Co-directed with Volker Schlöndorff, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alf Brustellin, Bernhard Sinkel, Katja Rupe, Hans Peter Cloos, Edgar Reitz, Maximiliane Mainka, Peter Schubert. S. Heinrich Böll, Peter Steinbach and the directors : C. Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein, Michael Ballhaus, Günter Hörmann, Werner Lüring, Jürgen Jürges, Bodo Kessler, Dietrich Lohmann, Colin Mounier. E. Heidi Genée, Mülle Goetz-Dickopp, Tanja Schmidbauer, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, Christine Warnck, Juliane Lorenz. A. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Armin Meier, Liselotte Eder, Hannelore Hoger, Helmut Griem, Wolf Biermann, Horst Mahler, Vadim Glowna, Angelika Winkler, Franziska Walser.

The Patriot (*Die Patriotin*, 1979).

The Candidate (*Der Kandidat* 1980). Co-directed with S. Stefan Aust, Alexander von Eschwege, Volker Schlöndorff.

War and Peace (*Krieg und Frieden* 1983). Co-directed with Stefan Aust, Axel Engsfeld, Volker Schlöndorff. S. Heinrich Böll.

Biermann-Film (1983) Co-directed with Edgar Reitz. Short.

In Search of a Practical and Realistic Attitude (*Auf der Suche Nach Einer Praktisch-Realistischen Haltung*, 1983). Short.

The Power of Feelings in Everyday Life (*Die Macht der Gefühle* 1983).

The Blind Director (*Der Angriff der Gegenwart auf die übrige Zeit*, 1985).

Odds and Ends (*Vermischte Nachrichten*, 1986).

Engine Cough (*Triebwerk-Husten*, 1996).

Space Flight as an Internal Experience (*Raumfahrt als inneres Erlebnis*, 1999).

News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx, Eisenstein, The capital (*Nachrichten aus Der Ideologischen Antike - Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, 2008).

Selected Writing

Attendance List for a Funeral trans. by Leila Vennewitz (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) (*Lebensläufe*, 1962).

(*The Battle*, trans. by Leila Vennewitz (London: McGraw-Hill, 1967) (*Schlachtbeschreibung*, 1964).

Co-written with Oscar Negt, *Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. by Miriam Hansen (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). (*Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*, 1972).

Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome, trans. by Christopher Pavsek (London, Durham, Duke University Press, 1996) (*Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang*, 1973).

Neue Geschichten: Hefte 1–18: "Unheimlichkeit der Zeit" (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977).

Die Macht der Gefühle (Frankfurt: Kohlhammer W, 1984).

'On Film and the Public Sphere', trans. by Miriam Hansen, in *New German Critique*, 24:4 (1981), pp. 206-220.

'The Political Intensity of Everyday Feelings', trans. by Andrew Bowie, in *Cultural Critique*, 4:1 (1986), pp. 119-128.

'Why Should Film and Television Cooperate?: On the Mainz Manifesto', trans. by Stuart Liebman, in *October*, 46:3 (1988), pp.96-102.

Co-written with Edgar Reitz & Wilfried Reinke, 'Word and Film', trans. by Miriam Hansen, in *October*, 46:3 (1988), pp. 83-95.

The Devil's Blind Spot: Tales From the New Century trans. by Martin Chalmers and Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 2004). (*Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*, 2003).

Tür an Tür mit einem anderen Leben. 350 neue Geschichten (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag Kg, 2006).